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AUTHOR Ruderman, Audrey J.
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ABSTRACT

According to the abstinence violation effect, highly controlled drinkers tend to overindulge following an initial slip. To investigate this relapse model, 47 male college students, ranging in age from 21 to 46, were assigned either to an unrestrained or a restrained drinker group according to their scores on the Restrained Drinking Scale. Subjects were given a choice of rating either wine or soda after one half of the group received an alcohol preload. An analysis of the results showed that, contrary to the abstinence violation effect, an initial slip in the control of restrained drinkers did not lead to overindulgence. Restrained drinkers who had an alcohol preload were less likely to select alcohol in preference to soda. Compared to unrestrained drinkers, however, restrained drinkers were more likely to select alcohol in the no-preload condition. The preload increased the self-control exhibited by the restrained drinkers. (BL)

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A Test of the Abstinence Violation Effect

Audrey J. Ruderman

University of Illinois at Chicago

Presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Anaheim, Ca., 1983.

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Abstract

This study tests Marlatt and Gordon's (1979) model of abstinence violation which proposes that a "slip" leads to overconsumption in highly controlled drinkers. Subjects identified as extremely concerned about exercising self-control over their alcohol consumption (restrained drinkers) or as unconcerned (unrestrained drinkers) had a choice of rating wine or soda. Prior to choosing, half were given an alcohol preload. Contrary to prediction, restrained drinkers who had a preload were less likely to select wine than those who did not. These results are discussed in conjunction with an earlier (Ruderman & McKirnan, 1982) study which found that restrained drinkers participating in a wine tasting test drank significantly more than unrestrained drinkers, whether or not they had had a preload. These studies differed in that the preload led to increased self-control among restrained drinkers in the present one, while it had no effect in the earlier one. This difference may be related to the extent to which the subject's choice in determining his alcohol consumption was emphasized in the two studies.

A Test of the Abstinence Violation Effect

Marlatt and Gordon's (1979) model of relapse in controlled drinkers and abstainers proposes that people's perceptions of control over drinking influence their response to an initial slip after a period of abstinence. Individuals who perceive that it is difficult to control their drinking are likely to further indulge, while those who perceive that it is not difficult are less likely to continue drinking. The tendency of the highly controlled drinker to overindulge following an initial slip has been called the "abstinence violation effect".

Ruderman and McKirnan (1982) tested this theory using a paradigm adapted from studies of Herman's theory (1978) of binge eating which also proposes that an initial slip in highly controlled individuals leads to overindulgence. Herman's studies compared the ice cream consumption of dieters (restrained eaters) and nondieters (unrestrained eaters) in a taste test. Prior to the taste test half the subjects received a milkshake preload. These studies found that restrained eaters consumed more after a preload than without one - indicating the "releasing" effect of a slip in control - while unrestrained eaters did the reverse (Herman & Mack, 1975; Hibscher & Herman, 1977). Following this paradigm, Ruderman and McKirnan compared the wine consumption of restrained and unrestrained drinkers in a taste test with half the subjects receiving an alcohol preload. Subjects' restraint classification was based on a restrained drinking

scale developed by the authors and modeled after Herman and Polivy's restrained eating scale (1980). Although these results were expected to parallel the binge eating studies, a different pattern emerged. Restrained drinkers drank significantly more than unrestrained drinkers, irrespective of preload.

Post hoc Ruderman and McKirnan speculated that participation in a wine tasting test in the middle of a school day may itself have been perceived as a "slip" by restrained drinkers (making the preload superfluous) and precipitated overindulgence. Based on this explanation, the purpose of the present experiment was to test Marlatt and Gordon's theory in a paradigm in which alcohol consumption was not required. Restrained and unrestrained drinkers were given a choice of rating wine or soda with half receiving an alcohol preload. The subject's choice of wine or soda was the dependent measure. It was expected that restrained drinkers who had a preload would experience the "abstinence violation effect" and opt for wine, while those who did not have a preload would maintain their control and select soda. Unrestrained drinkers in the no-preload condition were not expected to show a preference for either beverage, while those in the preload condition were expected to show some preference for soda.

Method

Subjects

Three hundred and eighty-nine males enrolled in Introductory Psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago completed the Restrained Drinking Scale (RDS). Eighty-nine of these individuals were of legal drinking age (21 or older). Their median restraint score was 78. Forty-seven males from this group, ranging in age from 21-46, participated in this study. Those scoring below 78 on the RDS were classified as unrestrained drinkers, and those scoring 78 or higher as restrained drinkers.

Procedure

As a cover story, subjects were told that the experiment was concerned with taste sensitivity - specifically, with the influence of alcohol on a subsequent taste experience. Half the subjects (preload condition) were given an alcohol preload of 2 glasses of Rhine wine which they drank in the experimenter's presence. The other half were told that they were in a comparison condition and would make taste ratings without drinking alcohol first.

Following the preload manipulation subjects were given a choice of participating in a taste test of wine, or one of soda. The subject's choice of wine or soda was the dependent measure.

Results

A chi-square test comparing the choices of restrained drinkers with preloads to those without preloads was significant, $\underline{\chi}^2/1=4.05$, $\underline{p}=.04$. Restrained drinkers in the no-preload condition were significantly more likely to choose alcohol than restrained drinkers in the preload condition. See Table 1. A chi-square test comparing the choices of unrestrained drinkers with preloads to those without preloads was not significant.

A chi-square test comparing the choices of restrained and unrestrained individuals in the no-preload condition was marginally significant $\underline{\chi}^2/1=3.67$, $\underline{p}=.06$. Restrained drinkers were more likely than unrestrained drinkers to select alcohol. See Table 2. A chi-square test comparing the choices of restrained and unrestrained individuals in the preload condition was not significant.

A chi-square test comparing the choices of restrained and unrestrained drinkers (irrespective of preload) was significant, $\underline{\chi}^2/1=5.9$, $\underline{p}=.02$. Restrained drinkers were more likely to select alcohol and unrestrained drinkers were more likely to opt for soda. See Table 3.

A chi-square test comparing the choices of individuals (irrespective of restraint) with and without preloads was significant, $\underline{\chi}^2/1=6.14$, $\underline{p}=.013$. Those who had had a preload tended to select wine, while those who had not tended to select soda pop. See Table 4.

Discussion

The above results do not support the hypothesis that an initial slip in the control of restrained drinkers leads to overindulgence. Contrary to this prediction, restrained drinkers who had an alcohol preload were less likely to select alcohol in preference to soda than those who did not. Compared to unrestrained drinkers, restrained drinkers were more likely to select alcohol in the no-preload, but not in the preload condition. In this study the preload seemed to increase the self-control exhibited by restrained drinkers.

In contrast to these findings, an earlier study by Ruderman and McKirnan (1982) found that restrained drinkers were not influenced by a preload. They drank more than unrestrained drinkers in a wine tasting test, whether or not they had had a preload (Ruderman & McKirnan, 1982).

These two studies differed in that the preload led to increased self-control among restrained drinkers in the present one, while it had no effect in the earlier one. This difference may be related to procedural differences in the two studies. In the present study, subjects had a choice of tasting wines or soda. Thus, it was difficult for them to avoid acknowledging responsibility for their alcohol consumption. In the Ruderman and McKirnan (1982) study wine-tasting was required. Thus, subjects could plausibly attribute their behavior to the situation, and overlook their responsibility for the amount of wine consumed.

On the basis of these two studies, it appears that factors other than the perception of having "slipped" contribute to binge-drinking. It would be worthwhile to examine the influence or attributions of responsibility and perceptions of choice in a drinking situation on the restrained drinkers alcohol consumption.

TABLE 1

DRINKING PREFERENCES OF RESTRAINED DRINKERS

	SODA	ALCOHOL	
NO PRELOAD	1	13	14
PRELOAD	6	6	12
	7	19	26

TABLE 2

DRINKING PREFERENCES IN THE NO-PRELOAD CONDITION

	SODA	ALCOHOL	
UNRESTRAINED	5	5	10
RESTRAINED	1	13	14
	6	18	24

TABLE 3

DRINKING PREFERENCES OF RESTRAINED AND UNRESTRAINED DRINKERS

	UNRESTRAINED	RESTRAINED	
SODA	14	7	21
ALCOHOL	7	19	26
	21	26	47

TABLE 4

EFFECTS OF PRELOADS ON DRINKING PREFERENCES

	SODA	ALCOHOL	
NO PRELOAD	6	18	24
PRELOAD	15	8	23
	21	26	47

REFERENCE

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DRINKING HABITS QUESTIONNAIRE

Several of the questions below use the word "drink". For the purposes of this questionnaire one drink = either 12 oz. of beer - 4 oz. of wine - 1 oz. shot of liquor either straight or in a mixed drink.

1. Do you have feelings of guilt after drinking a lot?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always

2. Do you give much time and thought to drinking?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always

3. Do you drink more by yourself than in front of others?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always

4. How often do you attempt to cut down the amount you drink?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always

5. At the time your drinking was heaviest, how much did you drink in a typical week?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
0-1 Drinks	2-3	4-5	6-7	8-9	10-11	12-13	14-15	16+ Drinks

6. What is the maximum amount you have ever cut back your weekly drinking as part of a resolution to drink less?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Not At All	1-2 Drinks	3-4 Drinks	5-6 Drinks	7-8 Drinks	9-10 Drinks	11-12 Drinks	13-14 Drinks	15+ Drinks

7. How often do you go on a drinking binge?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Never			Rarely			Sometimes		Often (weekly)

8. How frequently do you avoid "stocking up" on alcholic beverages?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always

9. What is the longest time period during which you intentionally refrained from drinking for reasons other than illness?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
No time	1-2 days	3-6 days	1-2 weeks	3-4 weeks	1-2 months	3-6 months	1 year	1+ years

10. How often are you in the mood for a drink?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Never			Rarely			sometimes		Always

11. Do you find that once you start drinking it is difficult for you to stop?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Not At All		A little		Somewhat		Moderately		Extremely

12. When you feel anxious, are you more likely to drink?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Not At All		A little		Somewhat		Moderately		Extremely

13. When you feel lonely, are you more likely to drink?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Not At All		A little		Somewhat		Moderately		Extremely

14. Do feelings of guilt about drinking too much help you to control your alcohol intake?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always

15. How much effort does it take for you to keep your drinking under control?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
None		A little		Moderate		A good deal		Great Deal

16. How much difficulty do you have controlling your drinking?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
None		A little		Moderate		A good deal		Great Deal

17. Do you keep track of what you have had to drink as a conscious means of limiting your intake?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always

18. Do you pay careful attention to the amount of alcohol you drink?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always

19. Do you drink less alcohol now than you used to?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
No		A little		Moderately		A good deal		Great deal

20. Do you drink too much at social occasions like parties and picnics?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always

21. Do you ever feel so nervous that you really need a drink?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always

22. Do you find it tempting to have alcohol around the house?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Not At All		A little		Somewhat		Moderately		Extremely